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INFO RUMJPG/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4325

RUMJDH/AMCCNSUL HONG KONG 2115

RUEHJA/AMEMBASSY JAKARTA 5430

RUMJKL/AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR 7117

RUMJMA/AMEMBASSY MANILA 5108

RUEHGP/AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE 8242

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3274

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EZ1:

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 20021

EXDIS

EZ2:

EO 12065: RDS-4-04/22/01 (ABRAMOWITZ, MORTON I.) CR-M

TAGS: PINR, TH

SUBJ: THAILAND AND ITS PROSPECTS -- KEEPING OUR
PERSPECTIVE

1. (C - ENTIRE TEXT)

2. IN READING POST-COUP WASHINGTON INTELLIGENCE SUMMARIES ON THAILAND, I AM A LITTLE CONCERNED ABOUT THE IMAGE OF THAILAND THAT IS COMING THROUGH BETWEEN THE LINES OR IN THE TONES OF ARTICLES. IN OUR ANALYTICAL EFFORTS TO DEAL WITH SPECIFICS AND BE PREDICTIVE, IT SEEMS TO ME THERE IS SOME LOSS OF PERSPECTIVE WITH A RESULTANT UNWARRANTED GLOOMY EMPHASIS ABOUT THE WHOLE SHOW HERE.

3. THE COUP IS A REMINDER OF A CONTINUITY OF MILITARY FACTIONISM IN THAI POLITICS. THE SPECTRUM OF POLITICS IS NARROW, MUCH IS PERSONALLY HIDDEN, AND EVENTS CAN MOVE QUICKLY IN A HIGHLY VOLATILE WAY. THAT IS LIKELY TO REMAIN FOR SOME TIME AND THE POLITICS OF THAILAND LOOK TO BE BUMPY FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. THAT, HOWEVER, IS HARDLY THE WHOLE STORY.

4. IT MAY THEREFORE BE USEFUL TO REVIEW SOME BASIC POINTS ABOUT THE NATURE OF THAI POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT HERE AS WE SEE THEM. WE OBVIOUSLY MAKE NO CLAIM TO INFALLIBILITY IN JUDGING THE INTRICATE AND PERSONALLY CONVOLUTED THAI POLITICAL SCENE. WE HAVE AT TIMES -- OF COURSE, RARELY -- LET OUR CE-

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SIRES FOR THIS COUNTRY LEAD US TO UNDERESTIMATE THE INTENSE FACTIONALISM IN THE PARTIES AND THE CONSPIRATORIAL NATURE OF MANY MILITARY LEADERS. POLITICAL PREDICTION IS A RISKY BUSINESS HERE AS IT SEEMS TO BE IN MOST COUNTRIES. NONETHELESS, THE BROADER SLEEP OF RECENT THAI HISTORY HAS MUCH CONSISTENCY. FROM THIS THERE SHOULD BE AN UNDERLYING SET OF BASIC ASSUMPTIONS SHARED BY THE FIELD AND WASHINGTON AS DEPARTURE POINTS FOR ASSESSING FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS.

5. PERSPECTIVES THAT STRIKE ME AS HAVING BEEN LOST OR DISTORTED IN SOME OF THE MORE RECENT WASHINGTON COMMENTARY INCLUDE:

-- FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, "INSTABILITY" AS APPLIED TO THAILAND WILL REFER PRIMARILY TO CHANGES WITHIN THE ESTABLISHMENT; CLASSIC CASES OF "MUSICAL CHAIRS AT THE TOP" OR "OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES," OR SOME SUCH STEREOTYPE, NOT SOCIAL REVOLUTION. THE POLITICAL SITUATION HERE SHOULD PROBABLY BE DESCRIBED MORE OFTEN AS "STABLE," MEANING THE ESTABLISHMENT STANDS TO CONTINUE FOR SOME TIME. THIS SEEMS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN THERE IS COMPARISON TO THE MORE CATAclysmic CHANGE THAT IN SOME COUNTRIES OFFERS THE ONLY SOLUTION TO SOCIETAL CONFLICT.

-- THE RECENT COUP IS AT WORST A REMINDER THAT THAILAND HAS YET TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF DEVELOPING A SOUND POLITICAL SYSTEM. TO ITS CREDIT AND AT SOME COST, THE COUNTRY HAS SUSTAINED A PLURALISTIC, OPEN AND GENERALLY FREE SOCIETY (WITH SOME LAPSES) THROUGH THE TURMOIL OF SEARCH FOR A STRONGER FRAMEWORK. IT IS NOT A POLICE STATE; IT DOES NOT (YET) HAVE SIGNIFICANT SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY PITTED AGAINST EACH OTHER; AND COUPS ARE MORE LIKELY TO CONSTITUTE A PAUSE OR SETBACK THAN A SOMERSAULT IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL EVOLUTION TOWARD A MORE PERMANENT SYSTEM WITH BROADER PARTICIPATION.

-- ECONOMIC PROBLEMS HERE ARE ALSO RELATIVE. IT MAY BE FASHIONABLE TO SAY THAT PREM OR HIS GOVERNMENT "CAN'T COPE," BUT THESE DAYS, WHO CAN BESIDES OIL SHEIKS? ECONOMIC PROBLEMS CONTRIBUTED TO KRIANGSAK'S DOWNFALL AND MAY DO THE SAME EVENTUALLY TO PREM. THAILAND CERTAINLY HAS SHORT-TERM ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. BUT THE POINT IS THAT THAILAND'S SITUATION IS ON THE WHOLE NOT TOO BAD. AT THE SAME TIME, NO FORMULA OR SET OF POLICIES WILL PLEASE EVERYBODY AND THE GOVERNMENT HERE MUST PAY A POLITICAL PRICE FOR THIS FACT. THAT DOES NOT MAKE THE COUNTRY UNIQUE OR SIGNIFICANTLY WEAKER THAN OTHERS. IT DOES ADD TO THE SHORT-TERM POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY. CLEARLY A MARKED ECONOMIC DETERIORATION COULD HAVE A PROFOUND POLITICAL IMPACT AS IT WOULD ELSEWHERE.

EXDIS

-- WEAK LEADERSHIP IS DECRIED HERE, BUT WILL PROBABLY BE THE NORM FOR A LONG TIME TO COME. THIS DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN DISASTER, DESPITE SOME PREDICTIONS TO THE CONTRARY. WITH 48 MILLION PEOPLE, A GNP OF ABOUT 32 BILLION DOLS, AND A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY, THAILAND IS PROBABLY TOO COMPLEX TO BE RUN AGAIN BY A STRONGMAN LIKE FIELD MARSHAL SARIT OF THE EARLY 60'S AND WILL BECOME INCREASINGLY TOO COMPLEX FOR CONTINUED MILITARY

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RULE. SHIFTING CLIQUE ALLIANCES MAY WELL CONTINUE TO PRODUCE COLLEGIAL LEADERSHIP WHICH FOLLOWS THE COURSE OF LEAST RESISTANCE AND RESULTS IN CONTINUING SHUFFLES AT THE TOP.

6. THAILAND IS AT A PARTICULAR JUNCTURE IN ITS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, STILL RECOVERING FROM THE JOLTS OF THE 1970'S. GIVEN THE CONTEXT, ITS GOVERNMENTS HAVE DONE REASONABLY WELL IN BRIDGING INTO THE 80'S, EVEN THOUGH SOME THAI MAY NOT BE SURE THE NATION IS ON THE RIGHT POLITICAL TRACK. THEY HAVE MOVED A LONG WAY FORWARD FROM THE EARLIER PROBLEMS OF CHAOTIC GOVERNMENT AND THE REPRESSIVE THANIN REGIME. SEVERAL INSTRUCTIVE SUCCESSES SHOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED:

-- KRIANGSAK FOR ALL HIS FAULTS HIT A STRONG AND COMMENDABLE NOTE WITH HIS GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION. THE PROBLEMS OF CLASSIC COMMUNIST INSURGENT ACTIVITY HAVE BEEN AT LEAST TEMPORARILY DEFUSED AND, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE TENSIONS, THE "LEFT" DOES NOT HAVE A FOCUS FOR UNIFIED ACTION.

-- THE PREM I GOVERNMENT WAS ONE OF THE MOST COMPETENT COLLECTION OF MINISTERS THAILAND HAS ASSEMBLED. I REGRET ITS DEMISE. IT CARRIED FORWARDED NEEDED ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING THAT, WHILE STILL SUBJECT TO ADJUSTMENTS TO SATISFY POLITICAL PRESSURES, HAS GOOD CHANCES OF LAYING DOWN A BETTER FOUNDATION TO SUSTAIN THAI ENTREPRENEURIAL STRENGTH AND RELATIVE PROSPERITY FOR THE NEXT DECADE OF TWO.

-- PREM HAS POLITICAL FAULTS AND IS BASICALLY WEAK. HIS TENURE IS UNCERTAIN. HE IS, HOWEVER, AN HONEST GENERAL AND PROMOTER OF PROFESSIONALISM IN THE MILITARY. HE IS NOW MAKING SIGNIFICANT PERSONNEL CHANGES IN THE THAI ARMY. THE THAI MILITARY HAS A LONG WAY TO GO, BUT, TO BE FAIR, IT HAS COME A LONG WAY TO GO. IT CAN'T BE DISMISSED OUT OF HAND AS A MILITARY FORCE.

-- THE COUNTRY HAS COPEDED SUCCESSFULLY WITH A POTENTIALLY DESTABILIZING REFUGEE FLOW AND THE PRESSURES OF VIETNAMESE AGGRESSORS NEXT DOOR. IT HAS IN THE PROCESS PROMOTED STRONG COLLECTIVE ASEAN ACTION AND ALIGNED ITSELF PROFITABLY TO BOTH THE PRC AND THE U.S.

7. LOOKING AHEAD, THERE ARE OBVIOUSLY A LOT OF UNCERTAINTIES. PREM IS TEMPORARILY STRENGTHENED, BUT THAT IS ONLY BECAUSE EVERYONE ELSE IS TEMPORARILY WEAKENED OR CONFUSED -- IT WON'T LAST. THE ARMY AND PALACE HAVE LOST PRESTIGE AND WILL HAVE TO READJUST, BUT THEY ARE NOT ABOUT TO FALL APART. PARLIAMENTARIANS, STUDENTS, LABOR LEADERS, POLITICIANS, MILITARY OFFICERS, BANKERS AND OTHERS ARE RESTIVE AND WILL ALL BE PUSHING FOR CHANGES, OPERATING IN THE THAI WAY WHICH MEANS EACH FOR HIS OWN AND NOT MUCH COOPERATION OR FORESIGHT. NONE OF THIS IS NEW. THERE MAY BE ANOTHER COUP, A CABINET SHUFFLE, AN ELECTION, OR NONE OF THE ABOVE. WE WILL DO OUR BEST TO ANTICIPATE OR IDENTIFY TRENDS AS THEY DEVELOP, AND IT IS IMPORTANT TO DO SO, SINCE THE U.S. HAS MANY INTERESTS IN THIS COUNTRY, WHICH CAN BE SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTED BY CHANGES IN PERSONALITIES OR POLICIES. AMONG THE MORE VULNERABLE, NARROWLY-BASED RTG POLICIES ARE THOSE RELATED TO CHINA, REFUGEES, VIETNAM AND OTHER SECURITY ISSUES, AND SOME ON THE ECONOMIC SIDE, ALL OF WHICH ARE OF INTEREST TO U.S.

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8. AS WE TRY TO MONITOR DEVELOPMENTS IN DETAIL, HOWEVER, WE SHOULD ALL KEEP OUR PERSPECTIVE ON THE NATURE AND MAGNITUDE OF THE LIKELY CHANGES INVOLVED. FOR THE TIME BEING, THAILAND'S PRO-WEST, PRO-U.S. ORIENTATION IS NOT AT STAKE; ITS ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE IS LIKELY TO BE REASONABLY STRONG; ITS POLITICAL TURMOIL IS LIKELY TO REMAIN WITHIN BOUNDS. THE U.S. SHOULD NOT GET TOO CLOSE TO ANY ONE PERSON OR POLICY AND AVOID BECOMING A POLITICAL ISSUE HERE, BUT WE CAN CERTAINLY REMAIN STRONGLY SUPPORTIVE OF THAILAND ITSELF, WITHOUT OVER-REACTING TO UPS AND DOWNS THAT ARE CERTAIN TO RECL.

EXDIS

OVER THE PAST THIRTY YEARS, MANY HAVE SEEN THAILAND IN DIRE TERMS. IN THE 50'S IT WAS THE THREAT FROM CHINA, IN THE 60'S THE INSURGENCY, IN THE 70'S THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FALL OF VIETNAM. THROUGHOUT ALL THIS, THAILAND HAS COME THROUGH WITH A CUMULATIVE RECORD OF NOTEWORTHY SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS. THE ODDS ARE VERY GOOD IT WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO DESPITE SOME LIKELY SELF-INFLICTED ROUGH WEATHER AHEAD. ABRAMOWITZ

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